



Flu Antiviral Medications

Can the flu be treated?

Yes. There are prescription medications called “antiviral drugs” that can be used to treat the flu.

What are flu antiviral drugs?

Flu antiviral drugs are prescribed by a health care provider and work by decreasing the ability of flu viruses to multiply. While getting a flu vaccine each year is one way to protect yourself and your loved ones from the flu, antiviral drugs may be used as a second line defense to treat and/or prevent the flu.

What are the benefits of flu antiviral drugs?

When used for treatment, flu antiviral drugs can lessen symptoms and shorten the time people are sick by 1 or 2 days. They can also prevent serious flu complications, like pneumonia. For people with high-risk medical conditions, antiviral drug treatment can mean the difference between a mild flu illness or a severe illness resulting in a hospital stay. They may also reduce the length of time people can spread the flu to others.

When should flu antiviral drugs be taken for treatment?

Studies have shown that flu antiviral drugs work best when started within 2 days of becoming sick. However, starting them even after 2 days of symptoms is recommended if the person is very sick from the flu or is at higher risk for flu complications. If you or your loved ones are at high-risk for complications and develop symptoms of the flu, check with your doctor promptly to see if antivirals are a treatment option.

What antiviral medications are recommended for treatment as well as prevention of flu?

The four drugs recommended for use are oral Tamiflu® (generic name: oseltamivir), inhaled Relenza® (generic name: zanamivir), oral Xofluza® (generic name: baloxavir), and intravenous Rapivab® (generic name: peramivir). These antiviral drugs fight against both influenza A and B viruses. Oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu®) is approved by the FDA to treat flu in persons 2 weeks and older and prevent flu in persons one year and older. Zanamivir (brand name Relenza®) is approved to treat flu in persons 7 years and older and to prevent flu in persons 5 years and older. Peramivir (brand name Relenza®) is approved to treat flu in persons 2 years and older and is not approved for prevention of flu. Baloxavir is approved to treat flu in persons 12 years and older, but should not be used for pregnant or breastfeeding women, person with complicated or progressive illness, or hospitalized persons as there is no information about use of baloxavir in these patients.

Who should take antiviral drugs for flu?

It's very important that antiviral drugs are used early to treat people who are very sick with the flu (ex: people who are in the hospital) and people who are sick with the flu and are at greater risk of serious flu-related complications, either because of their age or because they have a high-risk medical condition. In addition, close contacts of people with the flu who are at high risk of serious flu-related complications may prevent the flu by using flu antivirals. Other people also may be treated with antiviral drugs by their doctor this season. Most otherwise-healthy people who get the flu, however, do not need to be treated with antiviral drugs.

How can someone get an antiviral drug for the flu?

People must get flu antiviral drugs from their health care provider.

How long should antiviral drugs be taken?

The length of time antiviral drugs should be taken depends on if they are being used to treat or prevent the flu. To prevent the flu, antiviral drugs are usually prescribed for 5 days, although people hospitalized with the flu may need the medicine for longer than 5 days. Ideally, antivirals prescribed for flu prevention should be started within 48 hours after the most recent known exposure.

How effective are antiviral drugs at preventing the flu?

When used to prevent the flu, antiviral drugs are about 70% to 90% effective. Remember that flu antiviral drugs are not a substitute for getting the flu vaccine. Antivirals can only prevent the flu if you know you are exposed to the flu, and you may not always know.

What are the side effects of flu antiviral drugs?

Like any medication, side effects are possible and are different for each medicine. It is important for people to ask their doctors to explain how to use the medicine and any possible side effects. Health care professionals prescribing flu antiviral drugs should let their parents know about any serious side effects that can occur.

Can flu antiviral drugs help with other illnesses such as the common cold?

No. Flu antiviral drugs only work against flu viruses. They will not help reduce symptoms from the common cold or any other flu-like illnesses caused by viruses other than flu viruses.

What should be done if problems occur when taking the flu antiviral medicine?

If side effects occur while taking flu antiviral medications, people should talk to their health care provider immediately.

Can flu antiviral medicine be given to pregnant women*?

Yes. Oral oseltamivir is recommended for treatment of pregnant women with flu because compared to other recommended antiviral medications, it has the most studies available to suggest that it is safe and beneficial during pregnancy. Baloxavir is not recommended for pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers, as there is no available efficacy or safety data.

*For additional information, see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Recommendations for Obstetric Health Care Providers Related to Use of Antiviral Medications in the Treatment and Prevention of Influenza at https://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/antivirals/avrec_ob.htm.